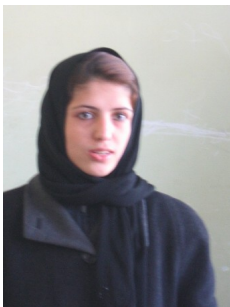


In 1996, the Taliban dictatorship in Afghanistan banned all girls from school. Their policy was to keep women uneducated and in the home. Yesterday, I visited the Miriam High School for Girls. Opened after the defeat of the Taliban, it is located in the capital city of Kabul. It now educates 7,000 girls in three shifts a day. There I met Sagia Sedigy, age 18. Keep reading for photos...



She was exiled in Pakistan for many years during the Soviet occupation and civil war that followed. She has returned home to a life and career one day -- she hopes -- as an engineer. Sagia is holding a T-shirt from Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire. Thanks to their Class President, Andrew Adair, Stevenson kids will be helping some of the girls at Miriam.



I also met with Zeya Ahmady, age 20, who stayed in Afghanistan and was not allowed to attend school from age 9 to 17. She studied some during those years in a secret school for girls in a teacher's home. A sign outside offered "Koran Studies." Each one of the girls or their teacher could have been beaten and arrested for learning to read and write. Zeya wants to be a doctor in a country with some of the highest infant mortality rates of any member of the U.N.



I had a short talk with Bahar Dawy, age 18. She was the hardest hit of all. Due to the Taliban ban on education for girls, she had no education until the Coalition replaced the Taliban. I asked her what her hopes were before 2001. "None," she said. "And today?" I asked. Bahar answered that "One day I hope to be Afghanistan's President."



The U.S. Agency for International Development helped rebuild this school in 2002. Nevertheless, some of the 7,000 girls go to class in tents donated by UNICEF. We are planning to do more through our government but I am as excited about the effort we will make. Working with the class presidents of 10th district high schools, we are planning to help Mrs. Nasima Sekandary, the Vice President of the school. In a country that once banned girls schools and still has an illiteracy rate of 90% for women, there is so much more we can do. It will help the girls at Miriam -- it will also broaden the commitment and values of our young leaders her in northern Illinois.